

Emerging Scholars in the Age of Uncertainty

Citation for published version (APA):

Schleper, S., Pál, V., Biasillo, R., Meredith, T., Kochetkova, E., & Spinney, E. (2018). Emerging Scholars in the Age of Uncertainty: Goals and Plans of ESEH Next Generation Action Team in 2018-2019. *Environment and History*, 579-581.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2018

Document Version:

Accepted author manuscript (Peer reviewed / editorial board version)

Document license:

Unspecified

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Emerging Scholars in the Age of Uncertainty: Goals and Plans of ESEH Next Generation Action Team in 2018–19

By Viktor Pál, Roberta Biasillo, Elena Kochetkova, Tayler Meredith, Simone Schleper and Erin Spinney

Published in *Environment and History*, 2018: volume 24, issue 4, p. 579-581, [Society Pages](#)

In recent years the environmental humanities have evolved in new and exciting directions, due largely to the democratisation of information and new digital communication technologies. Social media channels, smartphones and the ease of online communication have also helped to advertise the ideas of emerging scholars in the growing field of environmental history. Inspired by the success of other academic societies in supporting their early-career members, such as the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) Grad Caucus and New Scholars network, and the Tensions of Europe Network (ToE), the Board of the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) decided to initiate its own Next Generation Action Team (NEXTGATE), which was established in June 2018. The first tenure of NEXTGATE (2018–2019) consists of six scholars: Roberta Biasillo (Rachel Carson Center, Germany); Elena Kochetkova (Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, Russia); Tayler Meredith (University of Birmingham, UK); Simone Schleper (Leibniz Institute of European History, Germany) and Erin Spinney (University of Oxford, UK). NEXTGATE's coordinator is Viktor Pál (Higher School of Economics, Russia), who serves as Assistant to the Board.

NEXTGATE's mission is to reach out to and connect with emerging scholars within ESEH and the environmental humanities more broadly so as to strengthen their presence in the field of environmental history in Europe and beyond. NEXTGATE's main goal is to connect emerging environmental history and environmental humanities scholars with each other and to encourage and support early career scholars who work in the field. To achieve this goal, NEXTGATE aims to bring the challenges of early career scholars into ESEH discussions. In particular, NEXTGATE members believe that the main issues facing emerging scholars are financial uncertainty (lack of tenured jobs, prevailing short term contracts), the lack of visibility of the field and an inadequate professional network. NEXTGATE will not by itself solve such complex problems; however, a platform for emerging scholars – with regular events and means for exchange – will facilitate the scholarly discourse about difficult and often sensitive professional and personal challenges in a safe and friendly environment (online and in person).

Already, a NEXTGATE twitter account has been established and the group has begun to pursue a very active social media presence (See: <https://twitter.com/ENextgate>). With the successful example of NiCHE and its media presence, together with its live-tweeting at ASEH and Society for the History of Technology (SHOT) conferences, we are also developing concrete social media projects and goals. The first project, a Twitter Conference, aims to enhance the visibility of emerging environmental history and environmental humanities scholarship around the world. This digital platform will promote the work of scholars who are willing but not able to travel to the ESEH-Tallinn conference in 2019 due to financial, ecological or personal reasons.

At Tallinn, NEXTGATE will also organise on-site activities to enhance the visibility and integration of early career scholars in this lively and tourism-oriented city. For example, emerging scholars will be invited to join NEXTGATE's Academic Pub Night, a social programme in which participants are encouraged to interact freely with invited established scholars and participate in games related to their academic projects. This will allow emerging scholars to promote their own projects and widen their professional networks in a relaxed and supportive environment. The purpose of that social event also reflects NEXTGATE's goal to learn first-hand about the academic expectations and needs of emerging scholars. These experiences will help NEXTGATE better to cater to the needs of its members.

To enhance the visibility of our scholarly group, NEXTGATe is also in the process of building an environmental history dissertation database accessible via the ESEH website. This databank will be a searchable collection containing brief abstracts of dissertation topics and their methodologies, while providing links to full texts when available. With the database we hope to facilitate and stimulate additional intellectual exchange and cooperation across the generational divide.

In these uncertain academic times, another feature of NEXTGATe will be its activities as a support network. In its capacity of connecting emerging scholars, NEXTGATe will aid scholars dealing with such issues as job leads, family matters, long-distance relationships, and provide information, assistance, and encouragement in academic matters. This initiative is based on the powerful understanding that one's difficult situation may not be unique but actually rather typical in today's academic climate!

Lastly, but very importantly, NEXTGATe believes that the community of environmental historians must address the global environmental crisis much more seriously than it has to date. NEXTGATe casts a critical eye toward ESEH conferences and related consumer lifestyles concerning air travel, accommodation in chain hotels and gala dinners. As the extreme temperatures in Europe during the summer of 2018 and the environmental emergency of the blue-green algae that overran the Gulf of Finland attest, environmental historians congregating in Tallinn must be mindful that international gatherings come with a high environmental price. NEXTGATe is determined to look for new, sustainable ways to gather and communicate within the environmental history community in Europe and beyond.

For the rest of 2018 and 2019, the NEXTGATe team will be working on the projects outlined in this first report. A second blog to be published during the second half of 2019 will report on the groups' achievements, future plans and challenges.